

[By Xuan Thai and Tom Cohen](#)

Frustrated legislators from both parties called Tuesday for quick congressional action to get more money to the Federal Emergency Management Agency to help people reeling from recent disasters. The bipartisan group led by Democratic Rep. Peter Welch of Vermont spoke out a few hours before the Senate voted to open debate on a measure expected to add almost \$7 billion in emergency funding to help FEMA. The money is needed to help the agency respond to damage caused by Hurricane Irene, Tropical Storm Lee and other disasters.

A day earlier, the Senate blocked debate on the measure on a 53-33 vote that failed to get the 60 votes needed. Tuesday's vote was 61-38 and came after Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nevada, lambasted Republicans for what he called playing politics with emergency aid.

Republican senators who voted against the measure Monday complained they lacked enough time to study it, but Reid accused them of catering to tea party conservatives who oppose virtually any increased government spending, especially when proposed by the Obama administration.

"It's time for Republicans to prove -- for the first time this Congress -- that they are willing to put politics aside for the good of the American people," Reid concluded.

At a news conference later Tuesday, legislators from both parties, calling themselves the House Hurricane Irene Coalition, made impassioned pleas for Congress to act immediately to boost FEMA's disaster relief fund, which they said has dipped below \$500 million.

"While our constituents are working to get back on their feet, they cannot do it alone," said a letter to House leaders from Welch on behalf of the group. "Please provide funding that ensures the swift recovery of the families, farms, businesses in our districts."

Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-Connecticut, called for immediate help for "people who are in serious,

serious difficulty," adding: "We have an obligation. It's a moral obligation."

Republican Rep. Walter Jones of North Carolina said it is unacceptable to consider having to tell tax-paying constituents dealing with storm devastation that the government can't help them.

"We're going to be like a dog to a bone" in securing the money, Jones said.

Another Republican, Rep. Nan Hayworth of New York, said the House GOP leadership has "every intention" of providing FEMA with the needed extra funding without requiring budget offsets. House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, whose Virginia district was hit by an earthquake and the hurricane, previously called for spending cuts equal to any amount of extra funding for FEMA, but now has apparently backed off that stance.

The legislators seek an immediate \$500 million boost to allow the disaster fund to remain solvent through the rest of the current fiscal year, which ends September 30, and an additional \$5 billion or more for the next fiscal year that can help pay for ongoing recovery efforts.

After a series of destructive tornadoes earlier this year, including one that leveled a large portion of Joplin, Missouri, FEMA announced last month that it was not approving new long-term reconstruction projects so that it could ensure it has enough money for immediate emergency needs.

Political wrangling over the size and scope of additional emergency funding, including whether it would have to be offset by budget cuts elsewhere, has held up congressional efforts so far. In addition, Congress was on recess until last week.